

THE OTHER POLITICAL PROBLEM:
MONTAGNARD NATIONALISM
AND THE EFFECTS ON THE
VIETNAM WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

The FULRO rebellion in September 1964 was the direct result of Vietnamese meddling with Montagnard political identity, political identity created through Catholic missionaries, French colonialists, and American attempts to use the Montagnards to further their own political objectives. The overarching conclusion of this thesis asserts that the unintended results of prolonged historical abuse and misunderstanding of the Montagnard people contributed to the political instability of the central highlands of Vietnam around the time period of the Vietnam War. This instability caused serious complications for American and South Vietnamese efforts to secure the porous Central Highlands of Vietnam against communist aggression. Militant Montagnard nationalism, compounded by communist military operations in South Vietnam, contributed to the destabilization of the strategically important Central Highlands during the critical year of 1964. As a result, the United States government introduced large scale American military intervention into South Vietnam to combat the communist threat in South East Asia. While international communism, and not Montagnard nationalism, was the primary political factor causing American intervention, the story of the creation of a Montagnard militant nationalist identity plays an important role in the narrative of the Vietnam War. This

was a definitive contributing cause to the political turmoil within South Vietnam that influenced American intervention in an effort to create a viable American-assisted and democratic South Vietnamese government.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On September 19, 1964, Tracy Atwood, a volunteer agricultural training specialist, finished his daily assignments at the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camp located at a remote, but strategically crucial village of Buon Sar Pa. Buon Sar Pa is located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam along route 14, on the border of Cambodia and Vietnam, and south west of the Darlac province capital Ban Me Thuot. This strategic location on the borders of Vietnam and Cambodia provided American Special Forces Green Berets, and their indigenous comrades, a key forward operations base (FOB) to conduct interdiction patrols to interrupt North Vietnamese supply routes into South Vietnam. Atwood's primary responsibility as a member of the International Volunteer Services (IVS) was to teach local village inhabitants of the Central Highlands modern agricultural techniques. These techniques would allow Montagnard villagers the ability to add to their crop yield, improving the village's standard of living. On Saturday, September 19, Tracy concluded his classes in the early evening. He decided to remain for the night in Buon Sar Pa instead of risking a Viet Cong attack by traveling the 25 kilometers north along route 14 to return to the

agricultural center in Duc Lap.¹

Before retiring to bed, Atwood was approached by a CIDG battalion commander, a member of the native Rhade tribe assigned to Buon Sar Pa as part of the American led CIDG program. This Rhade battalion commander unintelligibly communicated that there would be trouble in the camp, but emphasized that no Americans would be hurt. The Rhade tribesman did not elaborate on his definition of trouble. Preparing for the worst, Captain Charles Darnell, Special Forces team leader at Buon Sar Pa, armed Atwood with a carbine and showed him where the emergency bunker was located in the event that trouble in the camp should arise.²

At approximately 1:00 A.M. on the morning of September 20, Atwood and members of the Special Forces Detachment assigned to Buon Sar Pa were awakened by automatic weapons fire and the sounds of combat raging throughout the camp. Expecting a Viet Cong attack, Atwood futilely searched for his carbine in the location where he had left it upon retiring to bed, but it was gone. Remembering the contingency plan provided to him the evening before by Captain Darnell, Atwood exited his quarters in an effort to retreat to the emergency bunker. As Atwood exited the bunkhouse he was met by members of the indigenous force detachment. One of them shouted in English “This is our Night! We’re going to kill Vietnamese!”³ Rhade tribesmen took Atwood to the Special Forces bunkhouse where he was met

¹ Gerald C. Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 152–153.

² Gerald C. Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 99–100.

³ *Ibid.*, 100.

by Captain Darnell and the other five members of the split Special Forces detachment. On the way to the team bunkhouse, Atwood witnessed the execution of the Vietnamese interpreter and the discarding of Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers' bodies into the camp latrine. A few hours went by before the sounds of rebellion subsided with the surrendering of the remaining Vietnamese soldiers assigned to the camp.

Rhade tribesman and indigenous camp commander, Y-Dhon Adrong, entered the bunkhouse and informed Captain Darnell that the organization, the United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races, better known by its French acronym FULRO⁴, had confiscated the camp in an effort to reclaim tribal land they alleged had been stolen by the Government of South Vietnam. From 1956 to 1959, tribal land had been confiscated through a government land redistribution program. This program took tribal land and gave it to Vietnamese refugees in an attempt to repopulate tribal lands with Vietnamese settlers in order to ease population pressure in the coastal lowlands. By midmorning on September 20, 1964, what became known as the Montagnard Rebellion had spread to the provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot and encompassed five strategically important CIDG camps situated in Darlac province around Ban Me Thuot. An estimated 3,000 American-trained and armed Rhade tribesmen were in open rebellion, killing 29 Vietnamese soldiers, seizing control of the provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot, and taking approximately

⁴ The official French name for the Montagnard nationalist movement FULRO is Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimees.

120 hostages. Twenty of those hostages were American military and civilian personnel.⁵ The FULRO rebellion in September 1964 was the direct result of Vietnamese meddling with Montagnard political identity, political identity created through Catholic missionaries, French colonialists, and American attempts to use the Montagnards to further their own political objectives.

European Catholic missionaries, practicing a holistic approach to ethnography, recorded the first descriptions of Montagnard culture. Missionaries created language tools and educational materials to assist missionaries in their proselytizing efforts among the indigenous populations of South East Asia. Daily interactions between missionaries and natives were interpreted through a western lens, contributing to the creation of Montagnard identity by categorizing villages based on linguistic, social, and proximity designations. In contrast, under French colonial practices the indigenous populations were designated and grouped under a single cultural identifier, Montagnard, used by French colonialist to identify the indigenous populations in census data and other government records and communications. French colonial administrators separated Vietnam's ethnic populations to maximize their political and military control by implementing a divide and conquer strategy. This was done by French intent to use ancient racial antipathy to eliminate the threat of a combined nationalist identity to ease colonial administrative burdens. This was done by creating a semiautonomous area for each

⁵ Jack Langguth, "Montagnard Revolt in Vietnam Believed Averted," *New York Times*, January 26, 1965, 2.

ethnic group who administered the area politically and militarily under French supervision. This developed what Professor Thongchai Winichakul terms a “Geo-Body,” or the creation of national identity through spatial creation of national boundaries using modern technologies of mapping, and government administration. Vietnamese policies of forced cultural assimilation instilled the motivation to rebel and create an independent Montagnard nation. With the American creation of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) in December 1961 indigenous populations learned to protect their villages from communist subversion and intimidation and inadvertently provided the means to rebel against the South Vietnam government. All of these contributing factors led to the creation of a Montagnard “imagined community,” or a nationalist movement to create a political identity that would provide basic protections to the indigenous population caught in the middle of an ideological battle between democracy and communism.

The overarching conclusion of this thesis asserts that the unintended results of prolonged historical abuse and misunderstanding of the Montagnard people contributed to the political instability of the central highlands of Vietnam around the time period of the Vietnam War. This instability caused serious complications for American and South Vietnamese efforts to secure the porous Central Highlands of Vietnam against communist aggression. Militant Montagnard nationalism, compounded by communist military operations in South Vietnam, contributed to the destabilization of the strategically important Central Highlands during the critical

year of 1964. As a result, the United States government introduced large scale American military intervention into South Vietnam to combat the communist threat in South East Asia. While international communism, and not Montagnard nationalism, was the primary political factor causing American intervention, the story of the creation of a Montagnard militant nationalist identity plays an important role in the narrative of the Vietnam War. This was a definitive contributing cause to the political turmoil within South Vietnam that influenced American intervention in an effort to create a viable American-assisted and democratic South Vietnamese government.⁶

The United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races is an ethnonationalist movement combining the indigenous autonomy movements of the Cham, Khmer Krom, and Montagnards. These native groups inhabit the border lands of modern day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The primary support for FULRO came from the Montagnard Rhade Tribe, with an estimated population total of 100,000⁷ located around Darlac province's capital Ban Me Thuot. FULRO disbanded in 1992 entering into a United Nations mediated agreement with the Vietnamese government to end armed political dissidence in the highlands of Vietnam.⁸ FULRO militantly advocated for the right of autonomy for the indigenous populations of South East Asia, with a primary focus on the Montagnards, who were principally located in the Central

⁶ George W. Ball, "Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected," *Atlantic Monthly* 230, no. 1 (1972): 37.

⁷ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 300–303.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts Over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 27.

Highlands of Vietnam. FURLO's political and administrative roots germinated out of an earlier nationalist movement known as BAJARAKA.⁹ The BAJARAKA movement was created in 1956 to protest the abusive policies of President Ngo Dinh Diem, who stole Montagnard land, ended the practice of teaching tribal languages and history in schools, and eliminated the Montagnard semiautonomous political region created by the French. These oppressive policies created a catalyst for political organization among the Montagnard community, inspiring protests against President Diem's policies created to assimilate the indigenous population through cultural eradication.

Peaceful protests conducted by Montagnards in Ban Me Thuot in October of 1958 enraged Diem, who effectively dismantled the BAJARAKA in the late 1950s through a combination of totalitarian tactics that included illegal imprisonments and the relocation of key leaders throughout the country of South Vietnam.¹⁰ Because the majority of the BAJARAKA leaders were employed by the government, Diem was able to disguise his malicious intentions by ordering the transfers of these individuals to new administrative posts. The President of BAJARAKA, Y-Bham Enoul, and his executive committee were imprisoned for their role in the events leading up to the October 1958 protests, spending the next five and a half years in various South Vietnamese prisons as punishment for their alleged role in undermining the Diem government. These tactics effectively dismantled the Montagnard nationalist

⁹ BAJARAKA is a name derived from the first two letters of the four primary tribes represented in the movement: Bahnai, Jaria, Rade (Rhade), and Kaho (Koho).

¹⁰ Peter Grose, "Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War Against Communists," *New York Times*, October 4, 1964, E6.

movement represented by BAJARAKA in its early stages, allowing Diem to continue to displace the indigenous population of the Central Highlands with Vietnamese refugees to secure the highlands from communist incursions and assimilate the Montagnards into the national South Vietnamese identity. President Diem's totalitarian tactics continued to anger American and Vietnamese leaders that on November 2, 1963, President Diem and his brother Nhu were assassinated during a South Vietnamese military coup led by General Duong Van Minh and supported by American leaders in Saigon and Washington D.C. This American coup and assassination was the first of many such political upheavals that contributed to the political turmoil affecting South Vietnam.

In January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh overthrew the military junta led by General Duong Van Minh (Big Minh) that had replaced President Diem. In an effort to repair the Vietnamese government's relationship with the Montagnards, Khanh released the BAJARAK leaders from prison on February 1, 1964, appointing Y-Bham Enoul as Deputy Province Chief for Highland Affairs in Darlac Province.¹¹ Khanh, who had served in the Central Highlands as a military leader in the 1950's, felt he understood the Montagnard political situation better than most Vietnamese leaders. As commander of II Corps he met with the BAJARAKA leaders before they were jailed by Diem in 1958. Khanh's effort was meant to increase Montagnard loyalties to the government, which had consistently abused the native population, creating racial

¹¹ Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, 161.

antipathy and political backlash. Upon release from prison, Y-Bham Enoul and other nationalist leaders revived Montagnard autonomist sentiment, preparing the political environment in the Central Highlands for a full scale revolt in 1964.

The indigenous populations of the Central Highlands are known as Montagnards, French for mountaineer or highlanders. They are an ethnically diverse native population, distinct from the Vietnamese in both language and customs. The French colonial distinction of “Montagnards” was comprised of 30 to 35 tribes,¹² totaling an estimated 700,000¹³ to 1,000,000¹⁴ people, or roughly five percent¹⁵ of the population of South Vietnam in 1964. Montagnard tribal land comprises an estimated two-thirds of the total land mass of South Vietnam,¹⁶ bringing the numerically superior lowland Vietnamese into constant turmoil with the Montagnards over land rights. French colonialists began referring to the indigenous tribes of the Central Highlands as Montagnards in the mid to late 19th century. The term implies that the indigenous people are a unified group in language, customs, religion, and demonstrate homogeneity among their daily interactions. By referring to the tribal inhabitants of the Central Highlands by their French designation Montagnards, the various tribal differences were forgotten, and the unique mosaic

¹² Grose, “Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War against Communists,” E6.

¹³ Langguth, “Montagnard Revolt in Vietnam Believed Averted,” 2.

¹⁴ Gerald C. Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, September 1967), V.

¹⁵ Grose, “Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War against Communists,” E6.

¹⁶ Charles Mohr, “Vietnamese Fear a Tribal Uprising: Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1966, 1.

that created this thriving ethnic Petri dish is incorporated into an oversimplified version of a unique and complicated ethnic history.

Before exploring nationalism among the inhabitants of the Central Highlands of Vietnam, it is important to understand what nationalism is and its role in creating a nation among multiethnic peoples who are bound by their primordial ties to smaller social, ethnic, and political groups. Political scientist Benedict Anderson defined nationalism as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”¹⁷ The people within any given community, depending on size, will never meet and establish a personal relationship with the majority of the people designated as citizens of a specified community. But in each of these citizens is embodied the idea of what it means to be part of that imagined community, an idea worth defending and dying to protect, an ideal that keeps people of different social, economic, and political backgrounds united in a feeling of fraternity where no physical connection exists. Nationalism is a political invention. It is a creation of a nation where one did not exist before, typically at the expense of primordial ties that have traditionally defined a particular group of people.

Professor Thongchai Winichakul contributes to Professor Benedict Anderson definition of nationalism as an “imagined community” by adding the idea of “negative identity,”¹⁸ or the ability to identify what it does not mean to be

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 6.

¹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 5.

associated with a certain group. This is typically seen among ethnic groups that characterize themselves by the differences they perceive among competing ethnic groups in a specified geographic area, or “Once the un-Thainess [un-Vietnameseness, un-Montagnardness] can be identified, its opposite, Thainess [Vietnameseness and Montagnardness], is apparent.”¹⁹ Winichakul discusses the creation of the modern Geo-Body using Siam, or modern day Thailand, as a case study to describe the creation of a modern nation state to define territoriality through modern ideas of borders. Through mapping, a specified area is designated as a nation through the combining of ancient boundaries. Newly identified rulers develop a common language to communicate what it means to be part of the new Geo-Body, and develop an ability to enforce or defend that newly geographic area from internal or outside antagonists. The creation of the Geo-Body is concrete, but the idea supporting the creation through mapping of the Geo-Body, or what it means to be part of that community, is not defined and will change as political thought ebbs and flows in any given modern nation.

Through modern techniques of mapping, Western powers created arbitrary lines of demarcation that combined religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and tribal community identifiers into an expansion of empire, or into a Geo-Body and “Imagined Community.” This empire expansion broadened the meaning of being part of the empire as a citizen versus what it meant to be associated through a

¹⁹ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 5.

native participation, void of the same rights and privileges awarded to a citizen. As empires grew and consolidated power by defeating the primordial political structures, native populations began to form ideas of nationhood. By developing political associations, indigenous populations were able to set aside “narrow loyalties, petty jealousies, and ignorant prejudices”²⁰ of their splintered communities to become a unified identity, working to gain their Geo-Body back from colonialists.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that there are two primary motivations behind setting aside ethnic loyalties for the creation of a larger community: “[First] the desire to be recognized as responsible agents whose wishes, acts, hopes, and opinions matter; and [second] the desire to build an efficient, dynamic modern state.”²¹ The first motivation to be recognized is the desire to have an identity, or a name that is publicly recognized and given certain rights and privileges in the newly created nation. The second motivation is the desire to have access to an improved standard of living through economic, political, and educational progress. The desire to be recognized as part of a greater community through subordination of primordial ties threatens to extinguish the definition used by people to identify and unite their individual communities at the expense of increasing their access to a better quality of life. In order to establish a truly modern state, an understanding of “fellow feeling” has to take place, which is the “...longing not to belong to any other

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Politics in the New States*, in *Old Societies and New States: the Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Gertz (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 105.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

group.”²² The ability of a politician to create this feeling among the various communal differences of any modern state is the cornerstone to establishing a viable, dynamic political system that unites a large community under a common moniker. But in order for the politician to combine ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional ties into fellow feeling, or the idea of being part of an “imagined community,” he or she must incubate a political structure that combines primordial sentiments to a new found loyalty to the state apparatus. This allows the original identity to be continued and not replaced and to be understood in the context of the more inclusive community. But to have a community, it has to be physically created. The Montagnard community was first created through a series of colonial and government policies that sought to identify the indigenous population and explain it in western terms. With the introduction of Catholic missionaries into Vietnam during the 16th century, the western world received their first records of the “savages” inhabiting the Central Highlands, and Montagnard identity began to be explained in western nationalistic terms.

²² Clifford Geertz, *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Politics in the New States*, in *Old Societies and New States: the Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, 107.

CHAPTER 2

MISSIONARIES, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE CREATION OF IDENTITY

In 1535 the Portuguese expanded their commercial grasp into South East Asia when Antonio Da Faria established an economic center in modern day Da Nang. The Portuguese found Da Nang bay to be a suitable port for ships of all sizes, strategically located along the direct shipping routes in the South China Sea. The Portuguese foray into Vietnam was short lived, failing to capitalize on long term influence in Asia due to their hubris, political corruption, and mismanagement. At this same time, larger more powerful European powers were expanding their empires in direct competition with the Portuguese, ending their early dominance in South East Asia.²³

European forays into Vietnam were difficult and filled with economic disasters. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Vietnam was divided by civil war among warring families, the Trinh in the north in the Red River Delta region and the Nguyen in the south in the Mekong Delta region.²⁴ Europeans attempting to open economic and diplomatic relationships with these warring factions found it difficult to penetrate the ruling courts of Vietnam, which were heavily influenced by the

²³ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 57.

²⁴ Pham Kim Vinh, *Vietnam: A Comprehensive History* (The Pham Kim Vinh Research Institute, 1992), 34.

Chinese Confucian political model.²⁵ Regardless of their extreme hatred for one another, the Vietnamese warring factions hated foreigners more. Despite their inner conflicts, they worked to expel the Europeans, who played a double-dealing political role by selling weapons and munitions to both sides of the civil war. This European duplicity created deep seeded animosity among the Vietnamese towards the western invaders. By the end of the 1600s only the Portuguese remained as the Dutch, French, and English closed their diplomatic offices in Hanoi and Pho Hien and returned to Europe. Commercial interests failed in opening Vietnam to western influence, but religious missionaries, specifically of the Catholic faith, left a lasting impact on both the coastal Vietnamese and the indigenous tribes inhabiting the mystical Annamite Mountains.

Jesuit missionaries seeking refuge after their expulsion from Japan established a mission in the Portuguese trading center of Da Nang.²⁶ With European influence waning in Vietnam, Christian missionaries sought to convert the masses of “heathen barbarians” of South East Asia in an effort to spread the message of Jesus Christ. As Catholic converts slowly grew in Vietnam, the arrival of Alexandre de Rhodes forever changed the ability of missionaries to teach the Vietnamese in their own language as a result of Rhodes’s creation of the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet. Born in the French town of Avignon, Rhodes was first introduced to Vietnam accompanying Portuguese Catholics traveling to Vietnam. Arriving at the

²⁵ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 58.

²⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (New York: Orbus Books, 1998), 10.

age of 28 in 1627, Rhodes set out to master the Vietnamese language. After six months of intensive study, Rhodes began to proselytize using his mastery of the language to influence converts to the Catholic faith.²⁷

With the increasing influence of Catholicism and the supplanting of Confucian mandarins in the lives of the Vietnamese Catholic converts, the political courts of Vietnam outlawed Christianity, imprisoning and executing missionaries who violated the emperor's edict. But faithful missionaries continued to return to Vietnam even though they faced persecution from the rulers of Vietnam.²⁸ Recognizing the weakening influence of Portugal in Vietnam, Rhodes and other missionaries began to seek political support from other Catholic nations in an effort to open Vietnam to western influence.²⁹ Attempting to overturn the 15th century Papal edict that granted Vietnam as Portugal's domain, Rhodes combated stiff Portuguese resistance to finally establish the French supported Society of Foreign Missions to advance Christianity in Asia. Rhodes lobbied to eliminate Portuguese influence in Vietnam,³⁰ which allowed for the more powerful French empire to become involved in Vietnam through the exploits of its citizens as missionaries and merchants working for the French East India Trading Company. French missionaries became employees of the company, expanding French economic influence while attempting to convert the

²⁷ Ibid., 39–48.

²⁸ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 60.

²⁹ Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, 66–67.

³⁰ Ibid., 67.

Vietnamese to Christianity.³¹

Throughout the 18th century European missionaries and merchants faced stiff opposition from the Vietnamese ruling elite, who remained suspicious of western motives in trading with and converting their subjects. French support for the expansion of empire in Asia was limited by the economic and social concerns of the French citizenry and the fight against England over influence in North America. A few French business, political, and religious leaders kept the dream of a French empire in Asia alive by investing time and money to expand their influence for the domination of Vietnam. Vietnamese political resistance and a lack of interest from French citizens preoccupied with domestic issues in the late 18th century limited the success of independent attempts by French citizens to expand their economic and religious influence in Vietnam. European incursions into Vietnam were compounded by the constant state of civil war between the southern Nguyen Kingdom and the Trinh Kingdom in the north.³² This civil war depleted Vietnamese treasuries and placed extreme hardship on the Vietnamese people who experienced death and persecution by the two warring kingdoms. In an effort to rectify these wrongs a populist movement erupted into rebellion, changing the Vietnamese political landscape.

The Tayson Rebellion erupted against the southern Nguyen rulers in 1772,

³¹ Oscar Chapuis, *A History of Vietnam: From Hong Bang to Tu Duc* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995), 171.

³² George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 2.

when three brothers accused of fraudulent business practices by the local Mandarins fought back. Originally limited to the region of Quinhon, the rebellion quickly grew into a populist movement with the rapid swelling of the Tayson army's ranks as peasants, tired of the mistreatment and abuse perpetrated by the Nguyen officials, flocked in droves to the Tayson cause. By 1775, three years after the start of the rebellion, the rebels had engulfed the southern portion of Vietnam displacing the Nguyen rulers and their oppressive policies with progressive taxation and land reform that alleviated the issue of land among the peasant class. Along with these progressive reforms, the Tayson leaders permitted Catholic missionaries to openly proselytize among the people of Vietnam. This acceptance of Catholic missionaries marked the end of the progressive rebellion as missionaries collaborated with political factions to reinstate the Nguyen dynasty.³³

Nguyen Anh, the sole survivor of the Nguyen dynasty, escaped to Siam early during the rebellion. Maintaining close contact with political supporters, Nguyen Anh led multiple incursions back into Vietnam to reconquer his dynastic realm, experiencing brief military success before being defeated by a superior Tayson army. In the 1780s Nguyen Anh met the French priest Pigneau de Behaine who became the chief advisor to the young Nguyen ruler.³⁴ Using his European contacts, Behaine armed the Nguyen armies with modern weapons and through a series of military reforms led the Nguyen armies to successive victories that reunited the Vietnamese

³³ Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*, 1–3.

³⁴ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 63.

nation under the Nguyen dynasty in 1802. The Nguyen dynasty would survive for the next 150 years, concluding with the final descendant of the Nguyen dynastic clan, French collaborator Emperor Bao Dai, being deposed by the upstart Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955 and retired to France to live out the rest of his days under the protection of the French government.³⁵

For the three centuries since the introduction of European influence into South East Asia, western religious and commercial interests focused on the easily accessible coastal lowlands, effectively ignoring the native inhabitants who continued to flourish as primitive peoples in the seclusion and protection of the jungle covered mountains of South East Asia. But with the rising persecution of Catholic missionaries, the primitive indigenous populations became the primary targets for civilization through conversion to Christianity. With the introduction of western ideals and the desire to understand native populations in an effort to civilize them, the first seeds of a modern Montagnard identity were planted by Catholic missionaries who categorized and documented the diverse tribes of South East Asia. The ethnographic actions of the missionaries were an effort to understand the cultural differences inhibiting widespread conversion to Christianity. Catholic missionaries were the first westerners to provide a group identity to the indigenous tribes of the Central Highlands, creating the germination of nationalism among the hill tribes where no common nationalist identity existed before.

³⁵ Chapus, *A History of Vietnam: From Hong Bang to Tu Duc*, 181–188.

The Montagnards are a grouping of aborigines of Malyo-Polynesian and Mon-Khmer linguistic stock.³⁶ Cultural anthropologists tend to agree³⁷ that this “...mosaic of races and cultures is the world’s most ethnically complex.”³⁸ The ancient ancestors of these aborigines migrated from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pacific islands into the low country of Vietnam.³⁹ As the Kinh, modern day Vietnamese, migrated south from southern China, they pushed these early inhabitants into the mountains where they established primitive cultures that exist today.⁴⁰ All Montagnards share common cultural, and physical attributes that allow them to be easily identified as Montagnards, but the linguistic differences that exist between villages is what truly distinguishes these indigenous peoples into a complicated mosaic of ethnic identity.⁴¹

The basic Montagnard political structure is village focused. Amateur anthropologists serving within the French colonial bureaucracy and Catholic missionaries attempted to classify these indigenous peoples in tribes, but finding little commonality among the various villages resorted to classifying each tribe based

³⁶ Robert L. Mole, *The Montagnards of South Vietnam: A Study of Nine Tribes* (Rutland, VT: Charles E Tuttle Company, Inc., 1970), 8.

³⁷ Cultural anthropologist, Robert L. Mole, describes the area of the Indo-China peninsula as “...one of the most ethno-linguistically and ethno-culturally complex areas of the world.” The quote from the U.S. Army Special Warfare School was selected because it sounds better.

³⁸ Manual, U.S. Army Special Warfare School, Fort Bragg - Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of South Viet-Nam, July 1964, Folder 02, Box 01, Ronald Rodeck Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2620102001> Accessed March 1, 2013

³⁹ Gerald C. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xv.

⁴⁰ Vinh, *Vietnam: A Comprehensive History*, 36.

⁴¹ Mole, *The Montagnards of South Vietnam: A Study of Nine Tribes*, 9–10.

on linguistic similarities.⁴² Early explorers and colonizers of the North American continent experienced similar difficulties among the Native Americans. Even among the larger Montagnard tribes, little political commonality existed, which limited common identity among the tribes for most of their existence.

Each village had its own tribal chief who represents the village during meetings to resolve disputes over land, property, or during the political linking of villages through the marriage process. These chiefs led in direct consultation with the local shaman or sorcerer who directed village worship, conducted physical healing, and protected the village from evil spirits. Montagnard villages tended to be self-sufficient in practicing the agricultural technique of swidden farming, or slash and burn. Agricultural production was supplemented with hunting and fishing to diversify the Montagnard diet. Due to their village self-sufficiency, little trade existed among different Montagnard villages or with their lowland neighbors. In some cases, however, some larger villages did develop economic ties with local Vietnamese Mandarins seeking to expand their political and economic influence into the Central Highlands. Because of the village-centered focus of the Montagnards and their economic self-sufficiency, each village was concerned with their immediate environment, staying isolated in their traditional village and rarely venturing outside of that environment. The limited contact Montagnards had with the outside world before the introduction of Catholic missionaries into the Central Highlands in the

⁴² Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 74–79.

1830s and 1840s⁴³ kept Montagnard political identity focused on the village.⁴⁴ The introduction of missionaries into the Central Highlands introduced western ideals of political and religious identity to the Montagnards. This new identity introduced by Catholic missionaries focused on religious identity within the Catholic Church, initiating the reorganization of the village centered tribes into communities stretching beyond the limits of the local familial village.

In 1825 the second Nguyen ruler, Emperor Minh Mang, issued an anti-Catholic edict that prohibited the teaching of the Catholic faith and instituted a violent campaign to remove Catholic missionaries from the country in response to missionary-led rebellions that challenged Vietnamese sovereignty.⁴⁵ Seeking refuge from this religious persecution, French missionaries desired to establish a safe haven in the Annamite Mountains among the indigenous peoples. The first recorded interaction between French missionaries and the indigenous peoples of the highlands came in 1830 when Father Père Gagelin requested the assistance of Sen-Fi, a Cambodian Mandarin with relationships with the native population, to arrange a meeting between a native inhabitant and Father Gagelin.⁴⁶

Father Gagelin's purpose was to begin understanding the indigenous people's habits in an effort to start active proselytizing among the native peoples. Father

⁴³ Catholic Missionaries were introduced to Vietnam in the 16th century. These early incursions were limited to the coastal lowlands until the early 19th century when religious persecution from the Nguyen dynasty forced the missionaries to seek refuge in the Central Highlands.

⁴⁴ Mole, *The Montagnards of South Vietnam: A Study of Nine Tribes*, 10–20.

⁴⁵ Nola Cooke, Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the "Annales de la Propagation de la Foi," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (June, 2004), 261–285.

Gagelin, through an interpreter provided by the Sen-Fi, began to pepper the Montagnard tribesman with questions attempting to explore the lack of contact between Montagnards and the lowland Vietnamese. Gagelin felt that Montagnards should open their traditionally secluded villages and actively engage themselves in the development of a modern society. This would allow missionaries to use conversion to the Catholic faith as a mean to civilize the primitive inhabitants of the Central Highlands. In response, the young Montagnard replied “When we appear in open landscape, we become afraid; but when we are in the bush, in the midst of tigers and other wild beasts, we are in safety.”⁴⁷ Gagelin did not understand the Montagnards’ desire to stay secluded and avoid living outside their traditional village centered environment passed down from their ancestors. As missionaries began to retreat into the highlands, they found various primitive villages at different levels of social and political development. The larger villages typically controlled the political situation in the Central Highlands, exercising domination over the smaller villages, conducting raids to exact tribute, and promoting an active slave trade in South East Asia. Some of the villages had formed strategic partnerships based on proximity and linguistic commonality. These partnerships can be best described as tribes, like the Rhade and Jarai who conducted regular trading with Vietnamese merchants and kept a tribute relationship with the Nguyen dynasty located in the ancient capital city of Hue. This tribute relationship promised protection to these tribes, but also a

⁴⁷ Saleminck, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, 43.

certain level of political and social autonomy that kept the natives in the mountains secluded from the hated Vietnamese.⁴⁸

When the universe was created, the God Yang Bot married the goddess Yang Gia and they had two sons. The older son was restless, always desiring to run and play and get into trouble, while the younger son was loyal to his parents, seeking to earn their respect and admiration. As these two sons grew older, the older son would disappear into the jungle, hunting and fishing and living off the land for years at a time, while the younger son remained at home to care for his parents and fulfill his responsibilities. Yang Gia, the mother, became sad due to her first child's actions, causing her illness and ultimate death. When the older son returned from his long absence, his father, Yang Bot, verbally accosted him: "You bad son, your mother died because of you. Why have you come back?" The older son talked back to his father, explaining he had gone on a trip, and asking how he killed his mother in his absence. Angered by the older sons' attitude, Yang Bot struck the older son with a stick and chased him into the jungle, where the older son found a sanctuary away from his father.⁴⁹

Yang Bot ignored his prodigal son, focusing his time and energy in developing his younger son. His younger son proved adept at acquiring new skills, married, and

⁴⁸ Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, 44.

⁴⁹ Manual, U.S. Army Special Warfare School, Fort Bragg - Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of South Viet-Nam, July 1964, Folder 02, Box 01, Ronald Rodeck Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 23–24. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2620102001> Accessed March 1, 2013

began to raise a family that quickly spread to inhabit the entire lowland areas. Seeing the success of his younger son made Yang Bot proud, but sad that his older son was not developing the same way. Growing older, Yang Bot left his lowland descendants and ventured into the mountains to search for his older son. Yang Bot found his older son and his posterity and grew worried about their lack of progress. He quickly invented a dialect, and taught them how to use the spear and arrow to hunt and protect themselves from wild beasts. Not being able to adapt to the mountain climate, Yang Bot passed away before he could teach his older son the advanced ways of society. From this time forward the older son and his posterity became the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands, while the younger son and his posterity became the lowland Vietnamese. Due to their different dialects they could not understand one another and avoided contact. The Montagnards remained in the protection of the mountains, while the Vietnamese remained in the lowlands, flourishing as a society.⁵⁰

This story relates through oral history the origins of the Bahnar tribe, but similar stories exist among other Montagnard tribes of the Central Highlands. These stories provide a specific identity that depicts the racial antipathy that exists between the Vietnamese and Montagnards, helping to create an identity by defining what it means to be Montagnard. Father Gagelin's ethnographic journey into the exotic world of the native inhabitants of the Central Highlands would be cut short

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23–24.

upon his arrest and execution in 1833 for violation of Emperor Minh Mang's edict. Gagelin became the 19th century rationale for military intervention to stop the persecution of Catholics in Vietnam, but that intervention would not occur until 1847.⁵¹ Seeking a safe base of operation for the spreading of Christianity, Catholic missionaries selected the Central Highland region of Kontum for its isolation from Vietnamese political control as the location to establish a sanctuary to allow converts and missionaries to escape the Vietnamese persecution.

With increasing persecution, Catholic leaders in Vietnam sought to build a mission in the Central Highlands that would place them outside the political reach of the Mandarins who were administering the anti-Catholic policies of the Mang court. Shortly after the execution of Father Gagelin, the Catholic bishop in Qui-Nhon, Bishop Cuénot, began to actively explore the creation of a Catholic mission secluded in the mountains. Cuénot began to send missionaries to the highlands to build relationships with the highlanders and document their political and social structures for the benefit of Christianity.⁵² Cuénot and his missionaries became acquainted with the Jarai tribe and their leader, the Master of Fire,⁵³ who maintained tributary and commercial rights with the Mang court of Annam located in Hue. Catholic missionaries sent to the Jarai found that the Vietnamese traders who maintained the

⁵¹ Cooke, "Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*," 264.

⁵² Jacob Ramsay, "Extortion and Exploitation in the Nguyen Campaign Against Catholicism in 1830s–1840s Vietnam" *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 35 (2004), 325, doi: 10.1017/S0022463404000165

⁵³ Also referred to as the King of Fire, this title was assumed by a principle leader of the Jarai tribe. Based on research it appears that the Master or King of Fire surrenders his given name for the title P'tau Apui. This title of reference carries great prestige and political clout among members of the Jarai tribe.

regional stability for the benefit of economic gain would be the most difficult obstacle to establishing a mission. In 1842, Catholic priests Duclos and Miche were arrested by the Vietnamese traders and imprisoned at Hue in accordance with the law. Accused of fomenting rebellion, Duclos, Miche, and three other French priests were sentenced to death but were released in 1843 because of the military intervention of the French Asiatic fleet. At least two more attempts to establish missions in the highlands were undertaken in Quang-Ngai and Quang-Nam, both failing. It was not until 1848 when a Vietnamese priest, Father Do, familiar with Montagnard custom and languages, was able to gain the trust of an influential Bahnar village leader and establish a mission in the Bahnar area of Kontum along the banks of the river Bla.⁵⁴

As missionaries moved into the central highlands, they found it difficult to communicate with the Montagnards because there was no comprehensive material to assist missionaries in learning the different village / tribal dialects. The lack of a documented vernacular, similar to that created by Alexandre de Rhodes in the 17th century, hampered the success of the early missionary incursions into the highlands. But the missionaries, persuaded by Vietnamese persecution in the lowlands, dedicated their time in the highlands to learning the vernacular languages of the tribes. They documented these languages in an effort to create materials to assist

⁵⁴ Oscar Saleminck, *The Ethnography of the Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization 1850–1900*, 44.

incoming missionaries learning tribal languages.⁵⁵ The development of tribal language learning tools quickened the ethnographic process performed by the missionaries by allowing language barriers to be broken. Catholic missionaries used their ability to communicate with the highlanders as a means to document tribal life. These documentations created a consistent image of the Montagnards that were used by Catholic missionaries, and later by French colonial administrators, to create an exotic identity of indigenous people in South East Asia. As westerners became acquainted with the Montagnards through these descriptions, Montagnards utilized these new resources to teach each other how to read and write, furthering Montagnard development in a modern society. These vernacular writings would be viewed as a threat by President Ngo Dinh Diem, who outlawed the teaching of Montagnard history and language, ordering the destruction of these materials, angering Montagnards who accused Diem of cultural annihilation.

With the arrival of French missionaries into the Central Highlands, the missionaries began to document their observations of the Bahnar and other tribes and villages they came in contact with. The purpose of these ethnographic studies was to help the missionaries become acquainted with tribal customs and taboos and use this knowledge to demonstrate to the Montagnards their primitive ways. The intention was to help civilize them through conversion to Catholicism. Through ethnography, Catholic missionaries were able to develop a written identity of the

⁵⁵ Jean Michaud, "Missionary Ethnography in the Upper-Tonkin: The Early Years 1895–1920" *Journal of Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 5, no. 2 (June 2004), 181–182.

Bahnar and other smaller villages in the Kontum region. But it was the political and military organization of these villages led by Father Guerlach in the 1880s to combat the larger Jarai and Sedang tribal villages that endeared the missionaries to these local tribes.⁵⁶ This sowed the seeds of an expanding Montagnard tribal identity through political and military organization against other larger tribal villages.

Early missionary accounts describe the natives as “good for nothing savages, who were childlike, evil, violent, and not to be trusted.”⁵⁷ Missionaries believed that the Montagnards were under the influence of black magic and were an inferior civilization compared to the Vietnamese. European missionaries agreed that the only way to arrest the decline of the indigenous populations was through civilization through conversion to the Catholic faith. As missionaries began to experience minimal success among the Montagnards, statistical reports began to be recorded documenting the number of baptisms, confessions, the number of schools created and their attendance records. These numbers were compared to the number of tribal / village members who had not yet shunned their pagan lifestyles and converted to Catholicism. Missionaries began to use western idea of census gathering to ascertain the strength of the church among the indigenous peoples. By gathering this data, missionaries introduced a practice of modern state identity by combining villages into tribes based on similar linguistics characteristics and proximity. The Catholic missionary legacy of ethnography laid the foundation that

⁵⁶ Saleminck, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, 49.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 55.

would be continued with the expansion of French colonialism in the late 19th century. This expansion saw a more scientific approach to ethnography among the indigenous tribes that contributed to the overall identity developed under the French moniker Montagnards.

French colonialist ethnography of the indigenous populations was an amateur affair for most of France's colonial experiment in Vietnam. In 1898 the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) was founded in the northern city of Hanoi. Full time ethnographers were not established at the EFEO until 1937, which limited French understanding of the native populations to the records created by missionaries, military personnel, and French explorers. Due to the amateur nature of the ethnographic methods, early French material on the Montagnards analyzed their culture, religion, and languages through a western prism and categorized the Montagnards as savages. The EFEO published in 1900 a manual providing the amateur ethnographer with basic guidelines to establish a scientific approach to the categorizing of the indigenous populations of Vietnam. The *Carnet d'instruction pour les collaborateurs de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* proposed linguistics classifications for the various mountain tribes by documenting a standard vocabulary with accompanying transcription. This was created to help the researcher identify the race of the people being studied through linguistic mapping.⁵⁸ Included in the volume was direction on how to create a proper ethnographic observation record,

⁵⁸ Saleminck, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, 75–76.

which was comprised of thirteen section headings for the report: generalities, habitation, clothing, nutrition, hunting and fishing, means of transport, culture, commerce, industry, war, society, art, and religion.⁵⁹

The ability to classify and understand the inhabitants of a particular area allows for the subjugation of those peoples under a specific form of government. During the early 20th century, multiple ethnographic reports were created and sent to the EFEO, some being published in various academic journals. The increase in the number of reports coincidentally coincides with instructions from the Governor General of French-Indochina to collect as much ethnographic material on the mountain tribesman as possible. Subsequently as more data on the tribesman were collected, the French began to assume more governmental control over the highlanders by supplanting the traditional Vietnamese administrative structure that had been in place since the mid-19th century.

In 1863 Emperor Tu Duc instituted a military pacification program called Son Phong. This program was established to mollify the tribal discontent in the highlands caused by Vietnamese abuse of the indigenous tribes. As the program matured, it became the primary source of government administration, soon growing into an exploitive program that economically took advantage of the indigenous populations through the lumber and slave trades. This economic exploitation fanned the ethnic tension that already existed between the Montagnards and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 75.

Vietnamese, resulting in a number of raids on Vietnamese villages to protest the abusive policies of the Vietnamese administration and military occupation. The abusive policies pursued by Vietnamese administrators created a difficult situation among the Montagnards in the Central Highlands, providing French colonialists with the justification to expand direct control over the agriculturally fertile Central Highlands.⁶⁰

In 1898, Paul Doumer arrived in Vietnam to assume the post of Governor General. Doumer instituted a plan to increase French control of the major population centers of Vietnam and the rural areas of French Annam. Doumer increased French control of the Central Highlands by reorganizing the Son Phong, effectively dismantling the organization and establishing “[French] supervised markets; the collection of monetary taxes; the right to request corvée labor; the interdiction to use fire or sound signals; and the possibility for Frenchmen to acquire land concessions for plantations.”⁶¹ This directly affected the Vietnamese that facilitated the daily administration of the Central Highlands, depriving members of the Son Phong of the political and financial graft they received for allowing the exploitation of the highland peoples. With the abolition of the Son Phong, Montagnard attacks on Vietnamese villages increased, creating a difficult political transition from Vietnamese administration to French colonial administration.

⁶⁰ Gerald C. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*, 273–275.

⁶¹ Saleminck, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, 76.

Explanations for the motivation behind the increase in Montagnard attacks are many, but two arguments emerge as the most realistic reasons for the increase in indigenous attacks on lowland Vietnamese villages. First, the former Vietnamese administrators are accused of inciting the attacks to create political discontent and force the French to reinstate the Son Phong as the economic and political base. This would allow select Vietnamese administrators to benefit financially at the expense of the indigenous population, further creating discontent and racial antipathy between the Vietnamese majority and Montagnard minority. Second, the Montagnards used the transition period to avenge the abuse they had experienced under Vietnamese administration.⁶² Montagnard revenge appears to be the most accurate reason for the increase in attacks. Vietnamese abuse combined with French ethnographic classification began to instill the idea of a Montagnard “imagined community,” creating the first instances of nationalism among the highlanders of Vietnam. The French bureaucrat Leopold Sabatier would have a profound effect on the creation of Montagnard nationalism by attempting to understand and catalogue Montagnard culture from a tribal perspective instead of through a western lens. Sabatier practiced cultural relativism, an anthropological idea categorized in the 1970s, but practiced by Sabatier in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in the early 20th century.

Leopold Sabatier arrived in French Indochina in 1903 as a low level civil

⁶² Ibid., 76–77.

servant. Disliking the humid lowlands, Sabatier requested a transfer to the mountain region of French Annam. Sabatier experienced firsthand the detrimental effects experienced by the Montagnards who were forced by Catholic missionaries to give up the primordial ties for a civilized Christian lifestyle. Sabatier felt that the complete abandonment of primordial ties was unnecessary and that the Montagnards could modernize their political process by recording and publishing tribal political and judicial structure that would allow indigenous leaders to govern their tribes based on uniform legal code. In 1913 Sabatier was provided the opportunity to implement his ideas among the Rhade tribe in the newly created district known as Darlac.

Understanding the dangers of outside forces attempting to culturally assimilate the indigenous tribes, Sabatier actively kept the Vietnamese, Christian missionaries, and French businessmen out of Darlac district. This allowed Sabatier to separate the Rhade tribe, effectively creating a “human reserve”⁶³ to protect Montagnard culture. Sabatier viewed the Rhade and other indigenous tribes as children, in need of a father who could guide them, protect them, and teach them how to govern themselves. He did this first through the creation of the Franco-Rhade school in the district center of Ban Me Thuot. Children attending the school would receive instruction in the “French language, history and geography, as well as

⁶³ Ibid., 80.

in Rhade culture.”⁶⁴ As the school progressed, it was led by the French headmaster, Dominique Antomarchi, who trained Rhade teachers to conduct the daily classes in French and in Rhade. To facilitate the teaching of the Rhade language, Antomarchi created a Romanized Rhade script that supplanted the use of the Vietnamese script taught in the majority of schools throughout Vietnam. Through the creation of an active education system, Sabatier created a healthy environment that prepared Rhade tribal members to contribute to the overall facilitation of government. This prepared the educated members of the Rhade to protect their people by understanding political administration.

Sabatier contributed to the creation of Montagnard identity by transferring the legal system from an oral tradition to written. This gave credence to the Montagnard legal system by codifying the legal tradition and translating and publishing it in French in 1919. Sabatier embarked on the creation of Montagnard legal text to protect the indigenous people from the Vietnamese and French economic forces attempting to exploit the highlanders who they believed did not have a legal tradition. The legal codex created by Sabatier did modify Montagnard law, placing a western interpretation on aspects of the law.⁶⁵ Subsequent French administrations modified or reinterpreted the law for their benefit. The establishment of this legal tradition, though tainted by western influence, contributed to the rise of Montagnard nationalism. President Ngo Dinh Diem’s

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ngo Duc Thinh, “Traditional Law of the Ede (Rhade),” *Asian Folklore Studies*, 59, (2000), 90.

policy of Montagnard judicial dismemberment angered Montagnard nationalists, who demanded its reinstitution as a concession for Montagnard loyalty to the Saigon government.

French ethnography, the creation of an educational system, and the codification of highland law all contributed to the rise of Montagnard nationalism by providing a common identity among the various tribes. But the primary French contribution to Montagnard nationalism was the creation in 1946 of a semiautonomous state governed by Montagnards under French supervision. This newly created French area was known as the Pays Montagnard Du Sud Indochinois (PMSI) or the Montagnard country of South Indochina. The PMSI encompassed the highland provinces of Darlac, Haut-Donnai, Lang-Bian, and Kontum. The most northern border of this area ended along the 17th parallel, east to the Annamite mountain range, west to the Laotian and Cambodian borders, and south to the Cochin China border, or the border with the southern third of Vietnam.

By specifying the particular boundaries of the PMSI, the French inadvertently created the modern Montagnard Geo-body identity through territoriality, or the creation of a modern state where one did not exist before. By 1950 the French grew concerned about Montagnard capacity to govern and created the Domain de la Couronne or Crown Domain under the control of Emperor Bao Dai. This gradual loss of autonomy did not cause much consternation among the Montagnards, who continued to serve the Emperor and the French colonialists against communist

forces during the French Indochina war. Emperor Bao Dai was an aloof leader spending most of his time hunting tigers and living a lavish lifestyle in his mountain retreat in Dalat and the French Riviera. This allowed the Montagnards to govern themselves with the support of French bureaucrats, free of the Vietnamese who had historically taken advantage of them. With the fall of Dien Bien Phu in May of 1954 and the signing of the Geneva accords, Montagnard nationalism would be accelerated, motivated by the culturally destructive unification policies of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

CHAPTER 3

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND MONTAGNARD NATIONALISM

President Diem arrived in Vietnam from his self-imposed exile in June of 1954. He was selected by the United States to serve as Emperor Bao Dai's Prime Minister, until reunification elections could occur in 1956 that would allow the people of Vietnam to choose their national destiny. Diem quickly set about consolidating power within South Vietnam through political strong arming and bribery supported by Edward Lansdale and the CIA. By 1955 Diem was the primary political force in South Vietnam. Under the guise of Vietnamese nationalism, Diem beat Bao Dai in the 1955 presidential elections, garnering an astounding 98 percent⁶⁶ of the popular vote. Diem created an authoritarian regime surrounded by members of his family and Catholic confidants that were awarded for loyalty over competence. The political mismanagement of the Diem years would exacerbate the issue of Montagnard nationalism through policies that specifically targeted the indigenous population of the Central Highlands for cultural assimilation.

As part of the Geneva accords, the Vietnamese people had the choice to relocate north or south of the internationally selected boundary of the 17th parallel.

⁶⁶ A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954–1975* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 94.

Catholic and anti-communist Vietnamese numbering approximately 1,000,000⁶⁷ left their homes in North Vietnam and migrated south to develop a better life in South Vietnam. This large influx of refugees strained the limited infrastructure in place in South Vietnam, forcing the Diem government to act quickly to stabilize this large body of refugees looking to develop a new life. Diem desperately needed land to redistribute to these refugees, and that land he found in the sparsely populated Central Highlands that constituted roughly two-thirds⁶⁸ of South Vietnam, but housed only five percent⁶⁹ of the total population of 17 million. The influx of Vietnamese into the highlands of Vietnam reignited ancient racial antipathy between the Vietnamese and Montagnards and elevated these antipathies to the forefront of the political situation in South Vietnam.

The majority of land in South Vietnam was owned by absentee landowners who had retired to France and other European countries during the French and Indochina war. These owners charged their tenants an unsustainable 50% to 70%⁷⁰ of the total crop yields, providing barely enough subsistence for the farmer to feed his or her family or provide a surplus to sell at the local agricultural markets. Before

⁶⁷ Land Reform Program Before 1954 and Land Reform Programs and Achievements Since July 1954, 31 July 1959, Folder 32, Box 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 – Democratic Republic of Vietnam, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 1.

<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2322032034> Accessed April 5, 2013

⁶⁸ Mohr, "Vietnamese Fear A Tribal Uprising: Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades," 1.

⁶⁹ Grose, "Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War against Communists," E6.

⁷⁰ Land Reform Program Before 1954 and Land Reform Programs and Achievements Since July 1954, 31 July 1959, Folder 32, Box 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 – Democratic Republic of Vietnam, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 1.

<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2322032034> Accessed April 5, 2013

Ngo Dinh Diem was elected President, there was no law protecting tenants from the abuse by land owners or from the produce brokers who would take advantage of these illiterate farmers at the local agricultural markets. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that approximately 85 percent⁷¹ of Vietnam's population lived in rural villages that derived their subsistence from agricultural employment. With the influx of close to 1,000,000 North Vietnamese refugees, a comprehensive land policy had to be established to increase the standard of living among the population of South Vietnam through a viable economic agricultural market.

President Diem created the office of Secretariat of State for Land Property and Agrarian Reform on May 10, 1955. He empowered this newly created office with broad powers to "use every possible means to carry out the land programs and to make up for lost time."⁷² Diem granted broad powers to the new Secretariat of State as a means to punish those wealthy land owners that aligned loyalties behind other candidates than Diem during the political consolidation of power in 1954 and 1955. Diem's land reform policy had two phases. The first phase created policies that would protect the tenant farmer from the previous practice of high rent and other general abuse heaped upon the tenant by the landowners. This phase of land reform policy had little effect on the indigenous populations of the Central Highlands, who continued to live and farm on their tribal lands with little disturbance from the government.

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

⁷² Ibid., 1.

The second phase focused on the redistribution of lands from wealthy land owners, who were paid below market price for their land by the central government. The government resold the purchased land to Vietnamese peasants in small lots of three to five hectares.⁷³ The government did not recognize Montagnard land rights, treating tribal land as government-owned land that could be distributed without consultation with Montagnard leaders. The Vietnamese erroneously believed that the Montagnards were nomadic tribes who did not have claim to any of the land in the Central highlands. A succinct Montagnard land tenure system (Po Lan) was discovered and reported to the government by Gerald C. Hickey, a member of the Michigan State University advisory group to Vietnam, and Price Gittinger, an advisor with the United States Operations Mission (USOM) Agricultural Division studying the possible detrimental effects the land redistribution program might have on the Montagnards. Gittinger and Hickey turned in two separate reports acknowledging a Montagnard land tenure system. President Diem and other officials rejected the report's findings and refused to meet with Montagnards to negotiate a resolution to government claims of Montagnard lands.⁷⁴ The second phase brought Montagnards and the Vietnamese into direct contention over the issue of land rights. With the rapid reintroduction of Vietnamese into the Central Highlands, President Diem began a concerted effort to eliminate Montagnard primordial ties by replacing them with Vietnamese customs. Diem pursued a common misconception among leaders

⁷³ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁴ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 42–46.

of newly independent former South East Asian colonies that primordial ties could not be integrated into a new national identity, but had to be eliminated and replaced with a common national identity. These actions, coupled with ancient abuses, were soon to bring a simmering discontent to a full boil. These were the chief circumstances that led to a series of destructive events affecting political instability in the Highlands, precursory to the Vietnam War.

After the October 1955 South Vietnamese Presidential elections, Ngo Dinh Diem acted quickly to begin eliminating Montagnard primordial ties. He replaced French-supported Montagnard administrators in the Central Highlands with Vietnamese bureaucrats, who governed the indigenous populations with an iron fist. The Vietnamese referred to the Montagnards as Moi, or savages, and refused to respect indigenous customs, laws, and social mores. Vietnamese administrators eliminated the tribal legal system, requiring that all Montagnard legal issues be handled according to Vietnamese jurisprudence. Indigenous languages were removed from the education system in an attempt to eradicate tribal languages, forcing students to study in Vietnamese. Educational materials written in the traditional tribal dialects were destroyed and replaced with Vietnamese language textbooks. Members of the thirteen Montagnard military battalions, who served during the French Indochina war, were disbanded and their members transferred to different Vietnamese military units to weaken Montagnard military capabilities. Indigenous officers were relieved of command and replaced with Vietnamese

military officers, and all Montagnard military personnel were forced to adopt Vietnamese names. Along with these policies of cultural assimilation, the Montagnard people experienced general segregation and racial prejudice by the incoming Vietnamese nationals who verbally berated, physically abused, and economically exploited the indigenous population.⁷⁵

Many Americans serving among the Montagnards compared Vietnamese treatment of the indigenous population to “... much like segregation in the American South”⁷⁶ and that “The Vietnamese treat the [Montagnards] as a lower social order.”⁷⁷ Other American personnel compared the plight of the native populations of South Vietnam to the Native Americans who were driven from their land and forced to assimilate into American culture. Wesley Fishel, chief advisor to the Michigan State University advisory group to Vietnam (MSUG), requested information in 1956 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. to gather ideas on how to manage the issues of the Montagnards in South Vietnam. The combination of the government’s policies of land redistribution, relocation, and cultural annihilation motivated Montagnard leaders to create the BAJARAKA movement, the first comprehensive Montagnard attempt at nationalism.

The creation of an “imagined community” requires the motivation on the part of a vocal leader to categorize the meaning of the newly created community. Using the current political situation as instigation, this leader will begin to recruit

⁷⁵ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 5–12.

⁷⁶ Langguth, “Montagnard Revolt in Vietnam Believed Averted,” 2.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

disaffected members among his or her immediate relationships to foment a nationalist movement. With the introduction of the government's cultural assimilation policies in 1955, Y Thih Eban emerged as the vocal leader who organized political discussions in the Rhade village of Buon Ale-A, laying the foundation for the recruitment and growth of the Montagnard nationalist movement. These early meetings began as simple discussions, allowing invited members to voice their grievances against Diem's antihighlander policies in a safe environment. Such discussions evolved into the development of the idea of what it meant to be a Montagnard.

Y Thih Eban invited the educated elite to attend and participate in these meetings, using the discontent caused by the government's assimilation policies as the primary tool of recruitment. After several meetings the attending members proposed the creation of Le Front pour la Libération des Montagnards, or FLM. Though small in size the FLM drafted the first letter outlining the abusive nature of President Diem's policies. This letter was sent to President Diem, but no response from Diem addressing the list of grievances has ever been recorded. The FLM continued to meet, but did not address the growing political discontent among the Highland peoples any further than the initial 1955 letter to President Diem. In 1957 many of the Highland administrative organizations were abruptly reorganized, reassigning the members of FLM to different provinces. Each of these newly relocated members of FLM became vocal leaders, recruiting new members to their

cause. These members went about establishing clandestine nationalist groups that met frequently to discuss the idea of Montagnard nationalism. Among the new members of these clandestine groups was a Rhade tribesman, Y Bham Enuol, a well-known civil servant lauded for his educational prowess and political skill.

Y Bham Enuol and other educated Montagnard teachers and civil servants flocked to the FLM, willing to share stories of alienation and racial segregation at the hands of the ever increasing Vietnamese population in the Central Highlands. With the growth of the FLM it became necessary to organize a leadership structure that would allow for the mobilization of the groups' members to further the political cause of Montagnard nationalism. Early in 1958 a central committee was formed naming Y Bham Enuol as president of the committee because he was the oldest in the group. Along with the formation of a central committee, representatives were selected to represent each province, city, and village establishing a succinct political organization advocating for the rights of Montagnards. During the consolidation and organization of the FLM, it was proposed to rename the group BAJARAKA, an acronym derived from the first two letters of each of the four major tribes represented in the group: Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade (Rade), and Kaho (Koho).

With the creation of the BAJARAKA movement, a formal list of grievances was documented to establish the purpose behind the movement. The document was drafted with various section headings detailing the poor treatment of Highlanders by the government. The first grievance listed was the consternation caused among the

Montagnards at the loss of their semiautonomous political zone under the French colonial administration. Complaints against pay discrimination, the abolition of highland courts, land redistribution, and general wanton destruction of highland culture and customs perpetrated by the government completed the document.⁷⁸ The formalization of the BAJARAKA manifesto established what it meant to be part of the Montagnard nationalist community, by distinguishing the “negative identity”⁷⁹ between Montagnards and Vietnamese. The policy of cultural assimilation pursued by Diem and his political allies toward minorities was consistent with the policies pursued by other political leaders in India, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia; leaders who attempted “...a gradual absorption of the minority tribes into the national community...”⁸⁰ These other nations sought to eliminate primordial ties and replace them with new nationalist ties to the state.

The communist government in Hanoi pursued a different policy towards the ethnic minorities of Vietnam focusing on cultural integrity and the establishment of autonomous political zones situated around the communist political model of loyalty to the party. Ho Chi Minh and the communist Politburo identified the ethnic minorities inhabiting the mountainous borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as key strategic partners in their struggle to reunite Vietnam and expel the “puppet” Ngo Dinh Diem government in Saigon. The infamous Ho Chi Minh trail, used to

⁷⁸ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 54–55.

⁷⁹ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 5.

⁸⁰ Viet Minh, 1957 Folder 08, Box 12, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 – Democratic Republic of Vietnam, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University, 13.
<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=23212080002> Accessed April 5, 2013

infiltrate men and materiel into South Vietnam, weaved through indigenous tribal lands along the borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Seeking to avoid a disruption of supplies, Hanoi attempted to garner the loyalty of these ethnic minorities to protect their supply lines supporting the communist cause in the south. The policies pertaining to ethnic minorities pursued by Hanoi mirrored similar ethnic minority policies implemented in both Soviet Russia and Communist China.

Understanding the importance of uniting under a common moniker to establish an ever growing nationalist base, but allowing for the retention of native identity within the party's structure, General Vo Nguyen Giap outlined the political policies of the communist regime toward Vietnam's minorities: "The aim of the nationalities of the Lao-Dong Party is to enable all national groups to achieve equality, unity, progress, and prosperity."⁸¹ Not only were the native Vietnamese important to the communist cause, but so were the ethnic minorities. Ho Chi Minh was willing to allow minorities to retain their indigenous identity in exchange for their loyalty to the cause of reunification.

The primary focus of Hanoi's policies was the creation of autonomous areas "...in which the various nationality groups are reportedly given an opportunity to develop themselves..."⁸² Hanoi would provide support and protection for these minority groups, but, not willing to surrender all political control, Hanoi did implement guidelines that each autonomous area had to abide by. This policy was a

⁸¹ Ibid., 53.

⁸² Ibid.

continuation of the French divide and rule policy that encouraged individual group autonomy at the expense of ethnic unification across linguistic and tribal lines.

By setting up autonomous areas, the communist government practiced “balanced favoritism,”⁸³ which allowed the government to perpetuate traditional antagonisms among ethnic groups to weaken individual groups that would demand greater political influence united under a single cause of ethnic autonomy. Not wanting to fight an armed rebellion in their rear while prosecuting an escalating war in the south, Ho Chi Minh wanted to eliminate domestic political situations that could distract the government away from its primary purpose of unifying the country. Even with certain rights granted to the minorities living in these autonomous zones, each zone had to pursue the communist cause by creating and maintaining regular military and paramilitary forces; developing communist cadres that could help keep members of the region in line with communist views; and support Ho Chi Minh, the communist party, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.⁸⁴ Communists in Hanoi paid lip service to many of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam, even enticing some to migrate north in 1954 and 1955. But these policies granted limited autonomy, not the full autonomy sought by the ethnic minorities who wanted to govern based on tradition and tribal customs. Even though ethnic minorities had to govern within the communist apparatus, they were granted specific rights that were not granted by the South Vietnamese government until

⁸³ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 55.

after the armed rebellion in September of 1964.

In 1946 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's constitution had guaranteed minorities' equal protection under the law and the right to an education in their native language. The tribal groups had a right to political representation within the national assembly and the guaranteed use of their native language in legal proceedings. These basic rights were outlawed by Diem, who sought to punish the ethnic minorities for their collusion with the French colonialists. Even with a more articulate ethnic minority policy, Hanoi's actual success among minorities is difficult to ascertain. Hanoi's policies decreased the threat of ethnic rebellions, allowing Hanoi to focus on the ideological struggle in South Vietnam. The communists actively recognized the polyethnic makeup of their country and sought policies that furthered the communist cause while building a national identity.

Ethnic minorities in North Vietnam did not obtain complete autonomy, but they appeared to have had a better political relationship with Hanoi than they had with Saigon. One of the primary reasons more Montagnards did not migrate north was because of their loyalty to ancestral villages and land. Also, the majority of Montagnards did not believe the Vietnamese, north or south could be trusted. If the North's policies towards ethnic minorities were as good as they were portrayed to be, it would lead an individual to believe there would have been a large migration north to participate within the political structure established for ethnic minorities by the government in Hanoi. The lack of migration is a testament to the limited ability

of the North Vietnamese government to gain the trust of minorities. While the government in Hanoi was experiencing relative calm among its minorities, President Diem and the South Vietnamese government continued to struggle with rising antigovernment sentiment among the Montagnards of the Central Highlands contributing to the rise of Montagnard nationalism.

In August and September 1958, leaders of BAJARAKA drafted a letter demanding political autonomy from the Saigon government, appealing directly to foreign ambassadors to support the cause of Montagnard autonomy. Political pressure was placed on the BAJARAKA movement through arbitrary arrests. The BAJARAKA central committee opposed these arrests, appealing to President Diem to release the imprisoned BAJARAKA members and requesting government representatives to convene a meeting to address the concerns of the highland peoples. Diem quickly mobilized his security forces to detain the BAJARAKA central committee, placing them in solitary confinement in a Pleiku prison. Members of the group organized a peaceful protest on October 12, 1958, in response to the imprisonment of its central committee. Fearing political discontent, President Diem dispatched the 23rd Armored Division to quell the protest. With the overwhelming show of Vietnamese military force the protest ended peacefully, without a shot being fired. President Diem retaliated further by confiscating traditional weapons from the highlanders to punish them for their support of the BAJARAKA

movement.⁸⁵ Most of the BAJARAKA central committee remained in political prison until 1964, effectively quieting Montagnard nationalist overtones until American intervention in 1961 with the creation of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), which replaced Montagnard traditional weapons with modern military rifles and modern military tactics. Such were proven effective in combating communist insurgents and oppressive governments.

⁸⁵ Grose, "Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point Up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War Against Communists," E6.

CHAPTER 4

THE RISING THREAT OF COMMUNISM AND THE CREATION OF THE CIDG

The political and military situation in Vietnam was quickly deteriorating at the start of the 1960s. Since December of 1959 South Vietnam had experienced a steady increase in Viet Cong terrorist activities and guerrilla warfare. These activities included armed propaganda and leaflet distribution, and the forceful taxation of the population to support the communist activities to undermine the Saigon government. This was further exacerbated by the murder, kidnappings, ransoms, ambushes, and general terrorist tactics against the South Vietnamese in order to destroy confidence in President Ngo Dinh Diem and his administration. According to the U.S. State Department, the purpose of these tactics was to “eliminate any semblance of GVN (Government of Vietnam) control in the rural areas...”⁸⁶ Viet Cong terrorist attacks from 1957 through 1959 totaled 1,012,⁸⁷ which is an average of 337 attacks per year or just less than one per day. In 1960 alone Viet Cong attacks grew

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1961–1963, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1961 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), Document 1.

⁸⁷ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 136.

by an unprecedented 2,100,⁸⁸ which is an increase of 623 percent. By creating discontent among the rural population, communist insurgents were able to create a shadow government and establish an area of operation that provided a strong base of operations to launch larger more complicated attacks against the metropolitan areas and government institutions.

An insurgency is “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”⁸⁹ Insurgents use all necessary weapons and diplomatic measures to weaken the central government and accomplish their political and military aims by delegitimizing the central government in the hearts and minds of the populace. The further a citizen is from the seat of government the more difficult it is for government policies and programs to reach the citizen, isolating him from progress and making him more susceptible to subversive tactics of the insurgents. The villages in the countryside provide a base of operation with an easily accessible population with limited loyalties to the central government. As support for the insurgency grows the people provide the subversives with food and clothing, and they become part of the community making it difficult for military and police officials to distinguish between insurgent and rural residents.

In a well-executed insurgency, the countryside is the most vulnerable to the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–2.

subversive tactics to destroy the confidence of the people in the government. Due to their distance from the seat of administration, rural populations bear the brunt of insurgent strategy. The rural populations distance from government influence and protection makes them vulnerable to insurgent intimidation and recruitment. As a result securing the rural population must become the primary focus of any military or government battling an insurgency of ideology. By securing the population, stability is ensured, allowing for economic development. This removes the insurgency's primary source of material and political support, forcing the insurgents to defend the gains they have made among the population. By the early 1960s the United States was attempting to develop a comprehensive counterinsurgency program by coordinating "...military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic action..."⁹⁰ programs around a common objective to secure the population and establish a viable South Vietnamese Government.

In an effort to combat the rising threat of communist insurgency, President John F. Kennedy authorized National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52 on May 11, 1961. This allowed for a "program for covert actions to be carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency which would precede and remain in force after any commitment of US forces to South Vietnam."⁹¹ The CIA understood early on the nature of the war in Vietnam as a political war for the hearts and minds of the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 80–81, as quoted in Thomas L. Ahern Jr. *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 39–40.

Vietnamese and indigenous peoples, but lacked an understanding of the depth of ethnic hatred that would later serve as a catalyst for rebellion.

Traditional American military leaders focused on the conventional side of warfare, fearing a cross border invasion by communist forces reminiscent of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June of 1950. The Annamite Mountain chain is considered the backbone of Vietnam. 1,100 kilometers long, the high plateau acts as the connector between the northern Red River Delta and the southern Mekong River Delta. Straddling the border with Laos and Cambodia, the Central Highlands became the primary infiltration route for men and military equipment from North Vietnam in support of the communist insurgency raging in the south. Because of its strategically located position along the internationally recognized borders with Laos and Cambodia, the Central Highlands became the primary focus of the American CIA in combating the communist insurgency inundating South Vietnam through the creation of the village defense program.

William Colby arrived in South Vietnam in February 1959 to serve as Deputy Chief of Station for the CIA. The situation in Vietnam was still relatively calm in 1959. Colby traveled the countryside with his young children, taking them on picnics in the Central Highlands and traveling to the 17th parallel to witness the flying of the North Vietnamese flag on the other side of the demilitarized zone. Colby traveled extensively with his family during the first few years of his assignment with the CIA in South Vietnam noting "The only dangers we encountered on these excursions came

not from hostile forces but from things like a train jumping the tracks, which forced us to spend one night in the jungle of Central Vietnam, where the children swore they heard tigers, or from the huge shark that our son Carl saw circling the small fishing boat we once hired for a ride in the harbor of the southern island of Phu Quoc.”⁹² In fact Colby worried more about the deteriorating situation in Cambodia where the neutralist Prince Sihanouk was thought to be a vanguard for the spread of communism to Thailand and South Vietnam than he did about South Vietnam during his first few years in country.

As Deputy Chief of Station in Saigon, Colby’s primary responsibility was to meet weekly with President Diem’s chief political advisor, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and build a relationship that would allow the CIA to exercise influence over the decision making process of the South Vietnamese government and keep Nhu abreast of the CIA operations to combat the increasing communist threat. As Colby conducted these weekly meetings with Nhu, mutual trust was affirmed and they were able to exchange personal ideas on the nature of the escalating conflict in South Vietnam. As the conflict began to escalate in the latter months of 1959 into early 1960, political forces against Diem demanded that Diem stop his repressive tactics, end the nepotism and corruption that was rampant in his administration, and grant fundamental civil rights to the citizens of South Vietnam. Anti-Diem forces contended that implementing these political measures would allow the South

⁹² William Egan Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 152.

Vietnamese Government to more effectively combat the escalating communist insurgency.

As communist military activity began to increase, the Diem government came under pressure to formulate a comprehensive plan to effectively combat the communist forces waging a war for the hearts and minds of the people of South Vietnam. This political pressure motivated Diem to retain as much power as possible, becoming more autocratic in his leadership tendencies. The increasing insurgency and internal political pressure on the Diem regime also started the American debate on the increasing role of the United States in South Vietnam, which “...fell to quarreling bitterly about what to do to meet the challenge....”⁹³ Each United States government department associated with Vietnam had its own ideas on how to best combat the communist threat. Each leader of these departments demonstrated extreme parochialism working to maintain their departments’ influence, which caused increasing friction and an inability of the United States to correlate their efforts to effectively combat the ideological battle being fought in South Vietnam.

The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) led by General “Hanging Sam” Williams advocated the development of a traditional military that could effectively combat a full scale invasion from North Vietnam. General Williams’ inability to think outside the box in combating the insurgency is a direct result of his

⁹³ Ibid., 159.

experience in World War Two and Korea, which were both conventional wars. The situation in Vietnam shared many interesting parallels with the Korean War, duping many American officials to chase the wrong threat. While US military leaders were planning for the full scale invasion that would not come until 1975, State Department officials were advocating for the removal of Diem from power if he did not adopt and implement State's recommended reforms. Colby, understanding the real battle was for the creating of a unified political identity focused on the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese population, and used the political and financial discretion afforded him by leaders in Washington to create the Citizens Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), later known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, in an attempt to align Montagnard political identity with Saigon.

Colby, named Chief of Station in Saigon, remained out of these turf battles being fought between MAAG and the Saigon Embassy. Colby continued to meet with Nhu working to develop a political strategy to weaken communist influence in the rural villages. Both Nhu and Colby recognized the nature of the communist threat as a "people's war" where the people's hearts and minds would be fought over using ideological tactics to build the necessary infrastructure to wage an armed conflict against the American supported government in Saigon. The solution developed by Colby and his CIA staff to combat the ideological struggle in the countryside was the Village Defense Program that would be later named the Citizens Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). The United States Army took over the program in

1963 under Operation Switchback, changing the name to the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). The CIDG program employed citizens in irregular units tasked with the defense of a certain village or series of villages that were in the immediate environment of the citizens who volunteered for the program. The familiarity of the local defense group with the area and local inhabitants allowed each group to isolate communist threats and eradicate them before they could become a political agitator. But the most important aspect of this program is that it involved "...the villagers in the economic and social improvements that the government was providing and to strengthen them [villagers] so that they could help defend themselves against Communist pressures."⁹⁴ Colby and his team selected the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands as the first to participate in this program. But Colby had to receive the approval of the Ngo brothers who had imprisoned Montagnard nationalist leaders and confiscated Montagnards weapons in 1958 as punishment for supporting Montagnard nationalism and autonomy through the BAJARAKA movement.⁹⁵

After explaining the importance of the CIDG program and its contribution to the political aspect of the war by combining "...security, economic, and social features..."⁹⁶ Nhu agreed to allow the experiment of arming the Montagnards to proceed, assuring Colby that President Diem would support the program. In October

⁹⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁵ Grose, "Tribes Trouble Saigon: Rebellions Point Up Need for Government to Win Wider Allegiance in War Against Communists," E6.

⁹⁶ Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA*, 166.

of 1961, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles approved the Saigon CIA station's village defense program. The CIA established the first Citizens Irregular Defense Group camp at the tribal village of Buon Enao in December 1961 in an attempt to secure the rural Montagnard population from the influence of communist insurgents.

The CIA was selected to manage paramilitary operations because the CIDG program was deemed outside the mission of both the Military Advisory Assistance Group Vietnam (MAAG) and the United States Operation Mission (USOM) by the interagency task force on Vietnam. Because of CIA experience in paramilitary operations supporting indigenous forces in Laos, the interagency task force on Vietnam recommended that the CIA should maintain complete control over paramilitary and irregular counterinsurgent operations in South Vietnam. The CIA was granted a blank check to conduct operations in Vietnam by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in January, 1962.⁹⁷ With Secretary of Defense authorization to bypass traditional decision making structures in Vietnam, the CIA could circumvent the cumbersome decision making process hindering the American response to the communist insurgency in South Vietnam and focus on the villages – the heart of the insurgency.

The Montagnards cautiously welcomed American involvement in the Central Highlands. After US personnel proved themselves reliable partners, recruitment to

⁹⁷ Thomas L. Ahern Jr. *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 40.

the CIDG program became easy because of the racial antipathy that existed between the Montagnards and Vietnamese. CIA case officers and Army Special Forces soldiers brought money, material, and access to medical services to the Montagnards, increasing their standard of living and building a fast growing allegiance to the CIDG program among the Highland People.

Vital to the success of the program was the CIA recruitment of a member of the International Voluntary Services, David Nuttle. Nuttle was assigned by the IVS to the Central Highlands to develop, implement, and manage economic and agricultural programs to increase the standard of living among the indigenous tribes. Fluent in the Rhade language and customs, Nuttle quickly gained the confidence of tribal leaders who vented their frustration with both the government and communist insurgents. Nuttle was informed by tribal leaders that communist forces were gaining traction among the Montagnards by promising autonomy and equal protection of the law to protect their customs and tribal mores. As arming the Montagnards through the CIDG program gained traction, Colby expressed the concerns of the Ngo brothers that the United States was suspected of supporting tribal autonomy, complicating United States–Vietnamese political relations.⁹⁸ After many assurances by Colby that the CIDG program would only assist to defeat a counterinsurgency and promising Vietnamese presence through Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers, Diem agreed to allow the continuation of the CIDG program.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 45.

Dave Nuttle and Special Forces Medic Paul Campbell began to build support for the CIDG among the Montagnards in the fall of 1961. Focusing on Darlac Province, Nuttle and Campbell began surveying tribes within a 70 kilometer radius of the provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot. Nuttle would explore the political situation in the various villages surveyed, while Campbell conducted medical examinations and treatments of Montagnards. Tribal leaders expressed hesitation in supporting the American backed program, worrying that the Americans would exploit indigenous forces. Part of this hesitation was a direct result of the proximity of these villages to communist sanctuaries. Government forces could not secure these villages, leaving them vulnerable to communist intimidation once the South Vietnamese military withdrew after daily patrols. It was decided that Buon Enao, a Rhade village 6 miles from Ban Me Thout, would be the village selected for a trial of the CIDG program due to its relative security from communist forces.

Nuttle and Campbell approached the village elders of Buon Enao in October of 1961. Campbell noted that village elders “took all proposals as something sneaky and...went to great conferences on all we said until they were satisfied.”⁹⁹ Part of the hesitation on the village elders’ part stems from the inability of anticommunist forces to protect these villages once they rendered support to government forces. Nuttle and Campbell requested that a perimeter fence and a hospital to care for the surrounding villages be built. Village elders objected to each request, forcing Nuttle

⁹⁹ Ibid., 46.

and Campbell to resolve each concern in order to get village elders at Buon Enao to approve the implementation of the CIDG program. Finally, in November 1961 construction of a perimeter fence and dispensary began, along with the arming and training on 50 local villagers from Buon Enao and 125 more Montagnards from surrounding villages. These villagers were employed into the program for 35 piasters per day, the equivalent of 50 cents a day in 1961.¹⁰⁰ After a week of operations in Buon Enao, the Rhade tribesmen "... were lining up at the front gate to get into the program. This kicked off the recruiting program, and we didn't have to do much recruiting. The word went pretty fast from village to village."¹⁰¹ The CIDG program spread quickly exhibiting the famous pacification doctrine of "tache d'huile" or oil spot theory created by Marshal Louis Hubert Gonzalev Lyautey in Morocco during the early part of the 20th century.¹⁰² Montagnard tribesmen began to welcome the American presence in the Central Highlands once trust and mutual reliance was verified between Montagnard leaders and Americans. Montagnard elders hoped American influence and presence in the highlands would act as a buffer against the Vietnamese political intrusion into the highlands, similar to the French role of keeping the Vietnamese out, and establishing a semiautonomous indigenous region. But with the success of the CIDG program came the covetous eye of the U.S. Army who saw the CIDG program as an offensive tool against the infiltration of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰¹ Francis John Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961–1971* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 26.

¹⁰² William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 91.

communist men and material on the Ho Chi Min trail.

The CIA administration of the CIDG program lasted for thirteen months. In January of 1963 the CIA was ordered to turn all operational activity of the CIDG program to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in operation “Switchback.” During the 13 months of CIA administration, the CIDG program “secured several hundred villages, some 300,000 civilians and several hundred square miles of territory from the Viet Cong, utilizing some 38,000 armed civilian irregulars.”¹⁰³ CIDG creator William Colby lamented that the program under Pentagon control lost its primary purpose as a defensive operation that involved the people “...taking charge of their own affairs...”¹⁰⁴ and that the United States decided to fight a conventional war instead of meeting the communists on their battlefield for the hearts and minds of the rural population.¹⁰⁵ As the CIDG program grew under Pentagon control, Vietnamese politicians in Saigon grew worried about the possible political crisis that could erupt due to the arming of the Montagnards. The program’s efficiency began to dwindle in the spring of 1963 as regular army officers changed the nature of the program from a defensive to offensive program. Whole villages were relocated to different locations throughout the Highlands to begin conducting offensive operations against North Vietnamese infiltration along the

¹⁰³ The GVN CIDG Political Action Program, 3 March 1965, Folder 19, Box 04, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01 – Assessment and Strategy, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 1. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2120419003> Accessed April 19, 2013

¹⁰⁴ *The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting publication No. 3-33.5, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Colby with McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam*, 166.

borders of Laos and Cambodia. Increasing Vietnamese distrust of the Montagnards culminated in the government's mass disarming of CIDG units.¹⁰⁶ This disarming further alienated many paramilitary soldiers who had fought to secure the rural areas of the Central Highlands from further subjection to communist forces. This betrayal by the government through the confiscation of Montagnard weapons reignited Montagnard nationalism contributing to the political instability plaguing South Vietnam.

General Khanh continued to face a deteriorating political situation throughout 1964, constantly battling internal attacks and the ever present communist insurgency. Understanding the importance of the Central Highlands to securing South Vietnam, he began to make gestures of goodwill towards the Montagnards in an effort to win their loyalty. He released Y-Bham Enoul and other BAJARAKA leaders jailed since the 1958 protests. Khanh attempted to understand Montagnard concerns by conducting a conference in May 1964 that would allow Montagnard leaders to present their grievances to the head of the South Vietnamese Government. This was the first time a Vietnamese head of state had initiated and attended a meeting with the Montagnards, allowing them a venue to express their concerns. Unfortunately, Khanh became quickly inundated by larger political concerns in the summer and fall of 1964. Internal attacks from anti-Khanh forces were a constant threat, as were the Buddhist protests filling the streets of

¹⁰⁶ David Halberstam, "Tribesmen's Excess Weapons Are Sought by U.S. in Vietnam: Situation Stirs Memories," *New York Times*, February 14, 1963, 2.

Saigon. It was under the guise of this political turmoil that the BAJARAKA movement combined with the Khmer and Cham nationalist movements to create the United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races (FULRO).

American and Vietnamese officials were awakened Sunday morning September 20, 1964 with the news that the American trained Montagnards had openly rebelled in five CDIG camps located in Darlac and Quang Duc provinces. During the initial stages of the rebellion the South Vietnamese flag was removed from the camp and replaced by the FULRO flag representing the aspirations for the creation of an autonomous state for Montagnards.¹⁰⁷ Khanh quickly began to blame “foreigners [American] and communists”¹⁰⁸ for instigating the rebellion and demanding that an immediate show of force be taken to end the rebellion. American officials were given time to attempt to mediate a peaceful solution to the rebellion, allowing Colonel John F. Freund to fly to Buon Sar Pa to negotiate an end to the rebellion.¹⁰⁹ Freund would later be awarded the Bronze Star for his work in mediating an end to the rebellion without further bloodshed.¹¹⁰

A list of FULRO demands to end the rebellion included a single representative to negotiate on behalf of all highlanders with the Saigon government; foreign economic and military aid to be funneled directly to a highland administration,

¹⁰⁷ Peter Grose, “U.S. General Visits Area,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1964, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Grose, “U.S. Saigon Aides Split On Revolt: Army Men Doubt Special Forces Influence Tribes to Fight Communists,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1964, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Grose, “U.S. General Visits Area,” 5.

¹¹⁰ Grose, “U.S. Saigon Aides Split On Revolt: Army Men Doubt Special Forces Influence Tribes to Fight Communists,” 1.

bypassing the corrupt South Vietnamese government; the right to maintain and receive American military training for a highland defense force; and the complete removal of Vietnamese from the Central Highlands allowing the return of tribal land to the Montagnards. Anthropologist Gerald Hickey, who was assigned to Vietnam as special advisor with the RAND Corporation, met with FULRO leaders at Buon Enao on Tuesday, September 22. These local FULRO leaders stated that the cause of the Montagnard rebellion was to force the South Vietnamese government to act and address Montagnard concerns about policies detrimental to highland customs and ancestral heritage.¹¹¹ The Vietnamese reluctantly took a back seat to the resolution of the rebellion until September 27, when Khanh, angered by what he considered eight days of ineffective negotiations, ordered Vietnamese Special Forces in the Highlands to surround the besieged camps and force the rebellious Montagnards to lay down their arms.¹¹² Colonel Freund was notified of the attack plans and coordinated a release of all hostages and the laying down of FULRO arms before the attack could occur.¹¹³ This move by Colonel Freund avoided further bloodshed and ended the September 1964 Montagnard Rebellion. This rebellion was the first of many rebellions that would continue to plague various South Vietnamese administrations until the Fall of Saigon in April of 1975.

Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was completely surprised by the FULRO backed

¹¹¹ Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, 154.

¹¹² Grose, "U.S. Saigon Aides Split On Revolt: Army Men Doubt Special Forces Influence Tribes to Fight Communists," 1.

¹¹³ Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, 157–159.

Montagnard uprising in September of 1964.¹¹⁴ Taylor and other American officials felt that the Montagnard nationalist movement FULRO was “...encouraged by success of Buddhist[s] and students to push their demands.”¹¹⁵ Taylor recognized that the Montagnards had legitimate complaints against the government for policies pursued that attempted to assimilate Montagnards into Vietnamese society. He also recognized that the Montagnard nationalist problem had to be addressed by Khanh, which would further contribute “... to [an] atmosphere of weakness that increasingly surrounds him [Khanh].”¹¹⁶ As Khanh grew weaker, the need for American military intervention to stabilize the security situation to allow for the development of a viable civilian government grew more essential.

Ever since Khanh’s January coup, the South Vietnamese political situation had continued to deteriorate. The constant pressure placed on Khanh by internal political and social forces worried American personnel about the stability of the situation in South Vietnam. The American purpose in Vietnam was to “Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam.”¹¹⁷ With the weakening political situation under Khanh, American personnel were constantly debating the merits of American military escalation of the Vietnam War. With the inability of the Saigon government to secure the strategically vital Central Highlands, its ability to defeat the communist

¹¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1964 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), 359.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1961–1963, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1961, 52.

insurgency was seriously hampered. The threat of Montagnard revolts lead by FURLO “...pose[d] an immediate and very serious problem for the GVN [Government of Vietnam].”¹¹⁸ The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 led to American reprisal bombings of North Vietnamese targets on August 5, 1964. The purpose of these bombings was to demonstrate American support for South Vietnam and to improve South Vietnamese morale and political stability. The bombings had the opposite effect, further deteriorating the political situation with “an abortive coup, a Montagnard revolt, further factional fighting, a weakening of Khanh’s position, and general deterioration.”¹¹⁹ Montagnard nationalism was a persistent political threat to the government, due to its command of the strategically important Central Highlands. After the September 1964 rebellion, Y-Bham Enoul and an estimated 3,000–5,000¹²⁰ American trained CIDG members fled to Cambodia to stage a constant military threat to the government.¹²¹ Subsequent Montagnard nationalist uprisings organized by FULRO distracted the Saigon Government from its main responsibility of battling the communist insurgency.

In October of 1964 Khanh conducted another meeting with Montagnard leaders in an effort to quell Montagnard political dissidence. Held in the highland city of Pleiku, Vietnamese officials wanted to discuss the political demands that

¹¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968*, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1964, 368.

¹¹⁹ Ball, “Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected,” 36–50.

¹²⁰ Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development*, vii.

¹²¹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968*, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1964, 448.

instigated the 1964 “Montagnard Problem.”¹²² The difficulty faced by the Vietnamese government was that Montagnards “... have never had a feeling of loyalty and attachment to the Vietnamese Government. In fact, average Montagnards in both cities and hamlets would like to rid Highlands of Vietnamese settlers and government.”¹²³ The strong desire for autonomy among the Montagnard people threatened the ability of the Saigon government to prosecute an effective war that relied on the control of the Central Highlands to extricate South Vietnam from communist infiltration. This was only possible with the help of Montagnard paramilitary units who were intimate with the land and people of the Central Highlands.

The Pleiku conference was held on October 15 and 16, 1964. Various delegations arrived at the conference representing different tribes and administrative areas. Each delegation was presented with the opportunity to express its concerns and aspirations. After the completion of the presentations, the delegates on site determined to focus on the comprehensive list of grievances and aspirations presented by the delegation from Darlac province. This list included the creation of government policy that protected Montagnard culture, the creation of government sponsored programs to increase access to education in their native languages, competent modern health care, an increase of government administration positions available to Montagnards, the promotion of Montagnard

¹²² U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1964, 368.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 448.

military personnel to officer and NCO ranks, a Montagnard military force of 25,000 to 50,000 personnel serving under the Montagnard flag, and the direct military and economic support of foreign governments without the intervention of the government in Saigon. Most importantly, Montagnard leaders wanted the government to pass a law that allowed indigenous peoples to own land, which the current law did not allow. Khanh promised to implement the majority of these demands, only refusing to authorize the bypassing of Saigon in relation to foreign military and economic support and the creation of a Montagnard military force that could be used to extract by force its desired concessions from politicians in Saigon.¹²⁴

After the completion of the Pleiku conference, American advisors in Vietnam strongly encouraged Khanh to implement the Montagnard political concessions he had agreed to in Pleiku. Khanh never actively managed the Montagnard problem, choosing to authorize basic rights but never implementing the full social and political reforms that would help end Montagnard political dissidence. This lack of proactive political management continued to anger American diplomats and military personnel who determined by February 1965 “...to convey to the military that we are not with Khanh all the way this time and that we sympathize with concerns of other generals.”¹²⁵ Premier Khanh recognized that American support for his removal was a direct result of his vocal opposition to increasing American involvement and

¹²⁴ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 111–112.

¹²⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968*, Volume 2, Vietnam, January–June 1965 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), 448.

his overtures to communist forces to end the conflict.¹²⁶ Khanh neglected to recognize the role his political inadequacies played in his forced resignation and exile and American escalation. Attempting to better the political situation in South Vietnam, the United States supported the anti-Khanh factions, forcing Khanh to resign and go into exile in February 1965. The resignation of General Khanh initiated a revolving door presidency in South Vietnam that contributed to the political instability that influenced American escalation of the Vietnam War to combat the growing communist threat to South Vietnam.

By 1965 the Saigon government had addressed some of the biggest issues causing political and ethnic tension between the Montagnards and the South Vietnamese. Legislation was passed that legalized the Montagnard right to own land, overturning legislation enacted by President Diem to punish Montagnards for their support of the French. At the same time legislation passed that reestablished the tribal legal system and permitted the teaching of tribal language and history in primary schools.¹²⁷ But the growing political turmoil caused by the increasing communist threat delayed the implementation of these laws, providing the political motivation for the Montagnard nationalist movement FULRO to continue to press their political demands.

The FULRO movement was widely supported by Montagnard leaders advocating for the fair and ethical treatment of the indigenous population. Not all

¹²⁶ Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954–1976*, 113–114.

¹²⁷ Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development*, 3–4.

Montagnard leaders officially joined the FULRO movement; many Montagnard leaders chose to stay politically involved with the Saigon government to advocate for political recognition through the established political process in Saigon. The FULRO and non-FULRO political camps maintained close contact, coordinating efforts to peacefully and forcefully demand equitable treatment from Saigon. By mid-1965 a non-FULRO leader defined the political relationship between the two camps by stating, "The aspirations of FULRO are the aspirations of all highland people."¹²⁸ Montagnard leaders, both FULRO and non-FULRO, wanted multiple avenues of progression towards their stated goals of political recognition and Montagnard autonomy from Saigon. During August–September, 1965, the government of General Nguyen Cao Ky opened negotiations with FULRO leaders at Ban Me Thout. During these negotiations dissident representatives maintained constant communication with non-FULRO Montagnard leaders helping to maintain unified efforts to achieve Montagnard political objectives. These talks broke down in late November over the inability of the FULRO and Saigon representatives to agree upon a solution to the question of Montagnard autonomy. In retaliation for the breakdown in talks and the continued political abuse imposed on the Montagnards, FULRO leaders organized a second armed revolt in December 1965.

The December 1965 FULRO revolt was a short but violent demonstration of Montagnard will to take violent action to achieve their political aims. On the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 4.

morning of Saturday, December 18, 1965, ninety-two Montagnard tribesmen, politically aligned with FULRO, captured Quang Duc's provincial capital of Gia Nghia. Tribesmen convinced the South Vietnamese soldiers garrisoned in Gia Nghia to lay down their arms. For the next five hours FULRO units maintained sentry, raising the FULRO flag over Gia Nghia to demonstrate their political desire for autonomy. With the arrival of South Vietnamese army reinforcement Gia Nghia was retaken without a shot being fired, ending the second FULRO rebellion in Gia Nghia.¹²⁹ However, a coordinated attack by FULRO units in Phu Bon Province killed thirty-five Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, turning the second FULRO rebellion violent. In retribution for this attack the Saigon government tried and convicted four FULRO leaders involved in the killings sentencing them to death by firing squad. Another fifteen FULRO soldiers were sentenced to five years of hard labor, followed by five years to life in prison.¹³⁰ American State Department officials reported to Washington that Saigon's handling of the failed December 1965 Montagnard uprising had "...stirred new tribal resentment and anticipation of harsh government treatment."¹³¹ The "Montagnard problem" continued to exacerbate the political instability in the Central Highlands with the increasing influence of FULRO among the Montagnard population. Montagnard leaders grew more sympathetic to the FULRO movement as Saigon continued to stumble its way through understanding and resolving the political

¹²⁹ "Montagnards Seize and Give up Town," *New York Times*, December 18, 1965, 6.

¹³⁰ "Four Montagnards Doomed for Revolt," *New York Times*, December 28, 1965, 9.

¹³¹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968*, Volume 4, Vietnam, 1966 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), 10.

demands of FULRO and Montagnard nationalism.¹³²

By 1966 the Saigon government began to take the “Montagnard problem”¹³³ seriously, creating for the first time a Special Commission for Highland Affairs (SCHA). The well respected Bahnar tribal leader Paul Nur, who had been jailed with Y-Bham Enoul in 1958 for his activity with the BAJARAKA movement, was named commissioner. Paul Nur’s political appointment made him the highest ranking Montagnard within the Saigon government. Along with the creation of the SCHA, the Saigon government implemented the legislation passed in late 1964 that reestablished the highland legal system and the teaching of Montagnard languages and history in primary schools. With the implementation of Montagnard friendly legislation, the SCHA worked as intermediaries between FULRO leader, Y Bham Enoul and the Saigon government. Political talks were resumed in May 1966 with Montagnard representatives demanding the creation of a Statut Particulier, or a Montagnard bill of rights that would enumerate within a single document a guarantee of Montagnard political rights.¹³⁴ The 1966 negotiations failed as a result of the Saigon government’s unwillingness to guarantee the Montagnard desire for political autonomy. American political adviser to the government in Saigon continued to support the Montagnard cause, encouraging South Vietnamese leaders to make the necessary concessions to win the loyalty of indigenous peoples. South Vietnamese leaders worried about giving too much to the Montagnards during

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Charles Mohr, “Saigon Worries about the Hill People,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1966, 206.

¹³⁴ Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development*, 3–4.

negotiations. One Vietnamese general commented that the Montagnards “...are like children with candy. If you give them too much it will make them sick.”¹³⁵ South Vietnamese leaders grew angry over the United States’ advocacy for the rights of the Montagnards. Most South Vietnamese leaders disliked the CIDG program, blaming the United States for the political upheaval among the Montagnards in Central Highlands.

In 1966, South Vietnamese Generals, led by Major General Vinh Loc, asked the United States to shut down the CIDG program. General Loc wanted to disarm the Montagnards and dissolve the American supported military units to eliminate FULRO’s military threat to the Saigon Government.¹³⁶ The Montagnards were fiercely loyal to the American military personnel that trained and served with them in the battle against communism. One of the big problems facing the United States was how to align Montagnard loyalty with the objectives of Saigon to establish an independent South Vietnamese state. The United States strongly encouraged Saigon to implement the necessary social programs to win the loyalty of the Montagnards.¹³⁷ General Ky continued to placate American officials seeking a resolution to the “Montagnard problem.”¹³⁸ In February 1966, General Ky made a speech in the highland city of Kontum declaring the Saigon government’s

¹³⁵ Mohr, “Saigon Worries about the Hill People,” 206.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ 2nd Supplement and Civic Action in the Mountain Provinces, 18 June 1965, Folder 06, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Insurgency Warfare, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 1. <http://vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualatchive/items.php?item=2171306003> Accessed June 7, 2014

¹³⁸ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968, Volume 4, Vietnam, 1966, 74.

“...determination to extend equal treatment to all Vietnamese citizens regardless of religion, region or ethnic origin....”¹³⁹ Ky emphasized to American leaders that he would give greater consideration to the Montagnards to resolve the longstanding issues between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese.¹⁴⁰ But Vietnamese racial antipathy towards the Montagnards complicated negotiations between the Montagnards and Saigon.¹⁴¹

The United States continued to struggle finding a solution to the “Montagnard problem.”¹⁴² A Special Forces soldier commenting on the issue of Montagnard loyalty said, “We have to find some way to transfer this loyalty unless we plan to make them [Montagnards] the 51st state.”¹⁴³ American officials were instructed to “... not concern themselves with the specific aspirations of ethnic or political groups which are considered to be contrary to the interests of the Vietnamese nation as a whole.”¹⁴⁴ American military and political representatives were never to deal directly with any member of FULRO, but to refer all inquiries of assistance to their Vietnamese counterpart. When issues arose between the Montagnards and Vietnamese, American officials were supposed to allow them to work it out, avoiding the demonstration of favoritism for either ethnic group. Along with avoiding intervention to resolve Vietnamese / Montagnard disputes, American

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴² Charles Mohr, “Saigon Worries about the Hill People,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1966, 206.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ 2nd Supplement and Civic Action in the Mountain Provinces, 18 June 1965, Folder 06, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Insurgency Warfare, The Vietnam Center and Archive: Texas Tech University. 1. <http://vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualatchive/items.php?item=2171306003> Accessed June 7, 2014

personnel were encouraged to advocate for open dialog between FULRO / Montagnard leaders and their Vietnamese counterparts on the political issues surrounding Montagnard nationalism. Vietnamese leaders continued to grow angry at American personnel over the perceived preference towards Montagnards; accusing American officials of fomenting Montagnard demands for autonomy.¹⁴⁵ These accusations of American personnel resulted in the reassigning and dismissal of American personnel to calm South Vietnamese anger over accusations of American encouragement of Montagnard nationalism.¹⁴⁶ Throughout the rest of the year 1966 and 1967 the “other political problem”¹⁴⁷ continued to complicate the American and South Vietnamese efforts to focus their attention on communist aggression, the primary threat to the sovereignty of South Vietnam.

By August of 1967 the 1966 Montagnard Statut Particulier began to gain traction with the support of General Vinh Loc. The Statut Particulier was designed to meet some of the basic aspirations and concerns surrounding Montagnard political identity in South Vietnam. On August 29, 1967, General Thieu signed the Statut Particulier granting increased political autonomy and enumerating specific rights guaranteed to the Montagnards.¹⁴⁸ Montagnard suspicion of Vietnamese intentions and historic racial differences continued to keep Y-Bham Enoul and FULRO hesitant

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968, Volume 4, Vietnam, 1966, 221.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Mohr, “Saigon Said to Oust 3 Aides of US Over Tie to Tribes,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1965, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Mohr, “Vietnamese Fear a Tribal Uprising: Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades,” 1.

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1964–1968, Volume 5, Vietnam, 1967 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), 264.

to realign politically with Saigon until significant concessions promised were implemented and Saigon's efforts at political reconciliation confirmed.

By 1968 the United States was deeply embroiled in the Vietnam War. Political sentiment in the United States was against the War and encouraged a speedy political resolution and withdrawal of all US personnel from South Vietnam. American military policies continued to disrupt the lives of the Montagnards caught between the battles raging in the Central Highlands for control of South Vietnam. The Montagnards were relocated onto reservations that allowed for the American creation of free fire zones. People found within the free fire zones were automatically classified as enemy combatants allowing military personnel to fire on any person found within those zones. This policy led to the deaths of many innocent civilians who were attempting to escape the turmoil of war by returning to their ancestral lands. As the Vietnam War progressed, the political and military situation continued to weaken, placing undue burden on the indigenous populations of the Central Highlands.

In an effort to better lead the Montagnard people and establish a legitimate form of political representation, FULRO leader Y-Bham Enoul left his Cambodian base camp in August of 1968 to enter negotiations with representatives of the South Vietnamese Government. This was not the first attempt by FULRO to negotiate with the Saigon government. Negotiation attempts were made during each year since

the 1964 Montagnard Rebellions that thrust the “other political problem”¹⁴⁹ onto Vietnamese and American officials. These early negotiations broke down due to the inability of FULRO and Vietnamese representatives to resolve longstanding cultural and political issues. The political reconciliation of FULRO with the government in 1968 had an immediate impact in terms of calming the political discontent of the Central Highlands between the Montagnards and the government. With the reintroduction of a Montagnard force of 3,000–5,000¹⁵⁰ trained jungle fighters the immediate military impact could be felt in the strategically important highlands, increasing military and intelligence gathering capabilities.

Both parties approached these negotiations in Ban Me Thuot in August of 1968 with a renewed resolve to overcome the political and cultural challenges that had plagued Vietnamese and Montagnard relations for centuries. This new resolve was accentuated by the attendance of Y-Bham Enoul, the Rhade leader of FULRO who had shunned the previous negotiations and instead sent an envoy to represent the FULRO organization. Discussed at the conference was a list of aspirations similar to the list presented at Pleiku in October of 1964. Chief among Montagnard concerns was the creation of an all Montagnard military unit led by Montagnards; the right to fly the Montagnard flag at all times alongside the Vietnamese flag; the creation of a Montagnard governmental office to handle all Montagnard affairs; the participation of Montagnard representatives in all conferences with foreign officials;

¹⁴⁹ Mohr, “Vietnamese Fear a Tribal Uprising: Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades,” 1.

¹⁵⁰ Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development*, 6.

and the direct supply of aid to the highlands, bypassing Vietnamese officials in Saigon.¹⁵¹

After months of negotiations, political reconciliation was finalized on December 12, 1968, because “all of our [Montagnard] demands have been met in discussions,”¹⁵² but not all members of FULRO were “convinced the South Vietnamese government would grant the Montagnards full citizenship in return for pledges of allegiance.”¹⁵³ Reports emerged that an estimated 250 dissidents captured Y-Bham Enoul and forced him and his family to live in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, attempting to persuade him to continue the FULRO movement. This new Montagnard political identity fought and negotiated for by Montagnard nationalist representatives would last until the fall of Saigon in April 1975. With the reunification of Vietnam under the communist government in Hanoi, Montagnards would enter a difficult struggle to establish a new political identity, facing government policies of abuse and assimilation into the nationalist Vietnamese society. These policies pursued by the communist government in Hanoi are reminiscent of Ngo Dinh Diem’s failed policies of cultural assimilation, which, combined with Montagnard interaction with Catholic missionaries, French colonialist policies, and American training and arming through the CIDG program, ended the Montagnard village centered identity and created a nationalist movement focused

¹⁵¹ Bernard Weinraub, “Tribesmen List Key Demands in Meeting with Saigon Aides,” *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1968, 6.

¹⁵² B. Drummond Ayres Jr, “Montagnard Autonomists Vow Their Loyalty to Saigon Regime,” Feb 2, 1969, 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

on the creation of a modern political identity. Montagnard nationalism was not the primary reason for American escalation of the Vietnam War, but a contributing factor to the disintegration of the South Vietnamese domestic political situation that led to the American decision to reintroduce American combat forces onto the Asian mainland. The inability of the Saigon government to integrate Montagnards into a cohesive South Vietnamese nation state made it difficult to establish the most important tenant of any counterinsurgent strategy – a viable central government that can “maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable.”¹⁵⁴ This inability of President Diem and subsequent South Vietnamese governments to establish a viable South Vietnamese “imagined community,” inclusive of all ethnic groups, as demonstrated by the “other political problem [of Montagnard nationalism] ,”¹⁵⁵ complicated the Saigon and United States governments’ efforts to combat communism, ultimately leading to the failed effort of creating an independent, communist free South Vietnam.

¹⁵⁴ Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 50–51.

¹⁵⁵ Mohr, “Vietnamese Fear a Tribal Uprising: Loyalty of Mountain People to Saigon Regime Fades,” 1.

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